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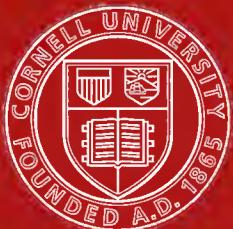
# GREEK CULTURE

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PROFESSOR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE  
AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY



REPRINTED FROM THE 1919 EDITION OF  
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## GREEK CULTURE

The term 'Greek culture'<sup>1</sup> properly embraces all the activities of the Hellenic race throughout all ages, with the influence of the Greeks upon other peoples and civilizations. A rapid survey can include only what is typical of the best periods, together with a few aspects of Greek tradition and influence.

Fifty years ago, Greek civilization seemed an inexplicable phenomenon, conditioned, indeed, by the geography and climate of the eastern Mediterranean, yet not derivative in the usual sense, since the early culture of Egypt and Asia Minor could not account for it, while to Thrace the Greek owed little more than an earnest desire to escape from Thracian barbarism. Of late, however, we have become aware of a vast pre-existent *Ægean* culture, having centres not only at Argos, Mycenæ, and Orchomenos, and in the Troad and Crete, but extending from the Archipelago to Syria and other distant shores of the Mediterranean. Archæology has pushed back the origins of Hellenic culture six thousand years or more; and if it does not explain the Greek genius and Greek art (since in art and genius there is always something that defies analysis), yet, by affording glimpses of age-long preparation, it satisfies the mind that is accustomed to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is reprinted from the 1919 edition of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 13, pp. 384—387, with the kind permission of the editor-in-chief.

the notion of simple origins and a process of evolution. Even so, in contemplating the efforts of the Greek genius, we should doubtless suspect the bias of our day, and be ready to credit more rather than less to the originating power of great individuals, and to the mutual inspiration of gifted men in groups, as compared with the vague effect upon them of the masses.

Explain the origins as we may, two periods stand out pre-eminent in Hellenic civilization: the Homeric age, approximately the tenth century B. C.; and the age associated with the name of Pericles, an interval of 100 years or so, beginning about 440 B. C.

The Homeric Iliad and Odyssey represent the flower of early Hellenic culture. They were not, as Lord Macaulay thought, the outcome of heroic barbarism; certainly they evince no unsophisticated art. Rather they seem to have appeared near the end of a high stage of civilization, possibly as it began to decline; though they idealize the life of a more heroic past. As to their origin, modern scholarship is now veering again toward the ancient belief in the existence of a gifted poet who may have composed both epics. True, there is in the Odyssey a difference in tone which led Longinus (or whoever wrote the treatise *On the Sublime*) to ascribe this poem to the old age of the author; and there are grounds for believing, not only that the Iliad is an earlier production, but that more than one hand may have been concerned in giving it the form it now possesses. But in any case, the Iliad, and still

more the *Odyssey*, betray a wonderful command of metrical composition, a vast knowledge of history, geography, tradition, and myth, extraordinary insight into the ways and motives of men, and an ability to unite all these poetical resources into a single plot for the attainment of a designed artistic end. In structure the *Odyssey* is more perfect than most of the dramas of Shakespeare and the works of virtually all modern novelists. Such an art no doubt is unthinkable in a poet working in isolation, without predecessors to learn from, and contemporaries to inspire and appreciate him. Accordingly, we must imagine a school of Aegean bards who gave rise to at least one superlative genius: Homerus, 'he who fits together' — a maker or fitter, not merely of verses, but of characters and incidents into one orderly plan with a beginning, middle, and end. The final measure of Homeric civilization is the poetic art to be seen in the two epics, from which, centuries after, the Aristotelian theory of poetry was largely deduced. But we have evidence that the Homeric age possessed also a noble architecture, knew the art of writing, was skilled in weaving tapestry, was expert in metal-work and woodwork, understood landscape-gardening and road-making as well as sculpture, and had developed a seemingly naïve, but very subtle eloquence. To judge from its two great epics, the age was benevolent toward religious tradition; not atheistical, but employing the tales of the gods in no very edifying way. The Olympians are brought down not quite to the

level of the heroes, while the heroes are elevated until, in conduct if not in power, they move on a plane not much lower than the gods as agents in the story. More important than all else, then, the Homeric age transmitted to that of Pericles ideals of human conduct — bravery and endurance in time of war, good counsel and fidelity in time of peace; at all times courage for individual achievement, coupled with reverence and an instinctive feeling that communal interests are supreme.

The age of Pericles is justly regarded as attaining the high-water mark of Greek culture. At this time Athens became the chief city of Greece and the centre of Mediterranean civilization. Here the various excellences of the several Hellenic stocks, Doric, Æolic, and Ionic, were tempered and united in one superior blend of character. Here the streams of dialect merged into one clear, vigorous, and beautiful medium of expression, the Attic. Here the early systems of philosophy which had arisen in distant Asia Minor or near-by Megara were sifted and incorporated into the native systems of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Here were developed tragedy and oratory; hither came comedy from Syracuse. Here the Homeric poems were learned by heart as the one basic element of education; and tragedies founded upon stories from the great epic tradition became familiar to a populace, large numbers of whom in course of time took part in the choruses. In this period, Athenian life was characterized by the dominance of a regulated imagination in every

sphere of activity, and by a complete interpenetration of theory and practice. Imagination, hand in hand with reason, appeared in the ordering of the State, in the development of commerce and colonies, in the public festivals and religion, in the consummation of every fine and every useful art. In fact, the distinction between fine and useful art was not observed, so that even the commonest utensils became objects of beauty, to be wondered at by subsequent ages. For the simultaneous flourishing of sculpture, painting, architecture, music, and poetry, no other age can be compared with this, unless, perhaps, the thirteenth century of our era. But in Greece the arts subsisted in closer combination with each other, with the functions of the State, with religion, and with life. Witness Attic tragedy and comedy, which arose in the worship of Dionysus, and were associated with the chief religious festivals and processions; were exhibited in a theatre which was virtually a temple of the god, a masterpiece of architecture in marble, capable of holding a large share of the free populace at once; were supported by a State that supplied every citizen with the price of admission; were produced by poets who took part in the acting, as well as in training the actors, and who were eligible to any office in the democracy (as Sophocles was appointed one of the ten generals who led the expedition against the revolt in Samos); were attended by strangers from every part of Greece, serving to unify the Hellenic consciousness; and in fact combined in one our modern drama, opera,

dancing, and lyrical poetry, with the embellishments of the best landscape-painting and artistic costume.

But Greek civilization was something more than what the Greeks actually accomplished, in art, or in commerce, or in statesmanship. The creator is greater than his works. More important than what they wrought were the agents, the men themselves, with their ability to produce both these and other works — with their unlimited capacity for contemplation and construction, for the highest kind of action, the orderly life of the spirit. Greek civilization means Phidias and Praxiteles, the sculptors, rather than the small part of their work now remaining. It means Ictinus, the architect; Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Plato, the philosophers; Pindar, the lyric poet; Herodotus and Thucydides, the historians; Demosthenes, the orator; Aristophanes, the comic poet; Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the masters of tragedy; and Pericles, the statesman, the artist and philosopher in government. There were also strange, indecent men, like Diogenes; and bad or irresponsible men, like Alcibiades and Cleon. Yet on the whole the Athenians maintained a norm of good and beautiful conduct, observing measure in all things, even while devoting themselves each to his chosen way of life and communal service; for the life of the individual was subordinated to the welfare of the State, and found complete realization therein — the State did not, as in modern times, mainly exist for the sake of the individual.

From this wonderful group and succession of gifted

and cultivated men, whose activities really constituted the essence of Greek civilization, it is customary, following the example of Thucydides and Plutarch, to single out Pericles, leader and conserver of the Athenian polity, as the representative citizen, and the type of Hellenic culture. Grave and reserved, fearless and eloquent, combining judgment with imagination, intelligence with sentiment, forethought with passion, of commanding presence, endowed, as it seemed to his fellows, with every physical excellence and power of mind, and possessed of the good breeding which is the crown of virtue, he might well have sat for the character-sketch of the 'highminded man' that is drawn by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But for our purposes of illustration, the magnanimous Sophocles may serve even better. For, first, he is a poet, or 'maker,' *par excellence*; and examples of his work are still intact, while the Periclean state came to a sudden termination. And secondly, it is easier to compare him with other typical Greeks, since he occupies the place of a golden mean betwixt the religious Æschylus, who 'did right' as a dramatist 'without knowing why,' and the rationalist and realist, Euripides, who drew men 'as they are'; whereas Sophocles, as he himself was aware, proceeded aright from correct principles of art as well as correct sentiments, and, observing men and human life even more truly than Euripides, nevertheless properly idealized his characters for the ends of tragic representation. As in his own life, so in elaborating his dramas, and in

the very process of displaying the misfortunes of a self-blinded *Oedipus*, he shows how the artistic regulation of impulse leads to success and happiness. Nor did his fellow-Athenians blunder in their estimate of him, for in the dramatic contests he secured first prize no fewer than twenty times. Moreover, in the comedy of the *Frogs*, Aristophanes, with his keen eye for disproportion, ridicules Æschylus somewhat, and Euripides yet more, for departing on this side or that from the golden mean, while he significantly refrains from attempting to distort the work of Sophocles.

As a typical Greek, Sophocles is religious; not, like the Athenians in their later decadence, 'too religious,' as Saint Paul described them. He is also many-sided, with a number of diverse faculties ready for the accomplishment of both his immediate and his final aim. But the unity and compactness of structure in his *Oedipus Rex* or his *Antigone* reflect the inner unity of spirit in their author. Sophocles knows when to amplify and when to inhibit; he is equally sensitive to broad perspective and to the value of each detail. His vision is steady and comprehensive, as a comparison of the eighth Psalm, in the Bible, with his chorus on man, in the *Antigone*, will disclose. He has formed a just estimate of the relation between external nature, mankind, and the divine. In the delineation of character he has never been surpassed, yet his plays do not, like those of Shakespeare, fail to take direct cognizance of the action of a higher divine power (not merely of an impersonal moral law) in the affairs of men.

But the typical Greek has his limitations. Although Homer and Sophocles have a sense of the divine in relation to human life, they are both polytheistic. Though in both we find ideal relations between men and women represented or suggested, and though Athens and the Parthenon by their very names imply a lofty conception of womanhood, Greek society was disfigured by an attitude to homosexual impulse that often resulted in words and actions at once base and grotesque; nor should one forget that the leisure of cultivated men was made possible by the labor of slaves. And though both of these poets attribute human failure to human blindness of heart rather than to fate or divine prejudice, the Greeks did not in the main identify divine providence with divine good will. Æschylus, it is true, may almost be termed monotheistic; and Plato has been called by the Jews themselves the Greek Moses, as by English scholars he has on occasion been styled a Puritan. But Æschylus said that his plays were only morsels from the Homeric banquet, while Plato, in spite of the criticism passed on the ancient epic poems in the *Republic*, is heavily indebted to them, and, closely as he approaches Hebraism or the modern spirit in his deepest reflections, he still remains a pagan. It was left for the Hebrews and Christianity definitely to assert a pure monotheism for transmission to modern times; to develop the idea of the fatherhood of God; and thus to establish upon a firm foundation the principles governing the relations between men and women.

women and women, men and men. Again, the joyous Greek was not the joyful Christian; nor was death to him the beginning of life. And again, the mediæval doctrine of ‘the gentle heart,’ from which our modern conceptions of lady and gentleman are mainly derived, was neither Greek nor Roman. While these conceptions owe much to classical antiquity, to the Homeric and tragic heroes and heroines, to the ‘high-minded man’ of Aristotle, to the Virgilian *Aeneas* (who was borrowed from the Greeks), they owe more to the Provençal and Italian, and to the Germanic and Celtic, attitude to woman; at the core they are Christian.

The Greek culture of the most vital period has been handed down to us by intervening civilizations. From Greece it passed to Alexandria, and from Alexandria to Rome. Græco-Roman culture was succeeded and preserved by that of Byzantium, and then, during the decay of learning in southern Europe, was preserved in Ireland and England and in Arabia and Syria, whence it returned to the Continent in the later Middle Ages. It has on three occasions reasserted itself with special force: at Rome under the Emperor Hadrian; in the thirteenth century in Europe; and again in Europe beginning with the Italian Renaissance, this last, however, being mainly Latin in character, and but secondarily Greek. Still, if we regard the Renaissance as extending to our own day, we find a better and better understanding and assimilation of Hellenism, until in poets like Shelley and Goethe we discover an

approximation to the Greek spirit almost as close as that achieved by the Roman Cicero, Virgil, and Horace. All five are, so to speak, not Greeks proper of the triumphant age, but, like Lucian and Plutarch, late and provincial imitators — who nevertheless have in them something of the original Hellenic genius.

What has Greek culture done for the world? Shelley in his enthusiastic way exclaims: 'We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their root in Greece. But for Greece, Rome — the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors — would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of institutions as China and Japan [in 1822] possess.' If pressed, Shelley would have to admit that European law was the invention of Rome; and that, so far as concerns religion, the function of the Greeks under the Roman Empire was that of formulating and transmitting, not of producing it. The Christian liturgy may have originated among Christian Greeks; ecclesiastical music is essentially Greek; the most original literary efforts of the early Christian era, the hymns, were composed, some in Greek, and some in Latin; and the New Testament was written in the commercial Greek (adapted) that had spread after the supremacy of Athens, and was the general means of communication for the eastern Mediterranean. For all that, the customary attribution of intellectual culture

to the Greeks, and religious culture to the Hebrews is in the main justified, if we remember that the difference between the two races is one of degree and emphasis rather than kind, that the Greeks were not unreligious, nor the Hebrews unintellectual. Strictly considered, the gifts of the two races to civilization cannot be regarded apart. Thus, as Renan points out, the Hebrews discovered various literary types as well as the Greeks. And yet we are safe in deeming the main literary types, and, as Shelley says, the arts in general, a bequest of the Greeks to the world. It was they who provided the models which have aroused the enthusiasm of mankind; for the epic and mock-epic, the poems of Homer; for tragedy, Æschylus and Sophocles; for romantic tragedy and tragi-comedy, Euripides; for political comedy, Aristophanes; for the character-sketch, the rhetoricians and Theophrastus; for domestic comedy, Menander; for history, Herodotus and Thucydides; for the dialogue, Plato; for the oration, Demosthenes; for lyrical poetry, Pindar; for pastoral, Theocritus. The satire, so far as we know, was another invention of Rome. But what is often thought to be the peculiar type of modern literature, the prose novel, nevertheless has its prototypes in the last productions of the Greek genius, the romances of Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius, and Longus. Even our scientific monographs, and the various types of literary criticism, in verse as well as prose, go back to Aristotle and his successors at Alexandria. In the main, Greek art has given us a conception of orderly

structure, when we have been willing to accept it, pervading all human activity and achievement. The Greek, in his city-state built upon a hill, developed a sense for architecture which reappears in every other art, and in all domains of life. The words and sentences of his oration or his drama are arranged like the stones in each section of his citadel and hill-crowning temple, and the several parts are fitted together in order due, like the face and divisions of the Parthenon. The nomadic Hebrew originally dwelt in tents under the stars of the desert. His architectonic sense is relatively weak. But his Psalms have expressed the grief and exultation of mankind; it is he who gave the final meaning to the Greek *Logos*, the Word incarnate and undying; and the Greek words Christ and Christian take us back not only to Rome and Greece, but, through Rome and Greece, to Palestine. In any case they lead us to the Mediterranean sources of all modern civilization.

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